

## **Newport Rhythm Band Cape**

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the rat-a-tat-tat of drums and other percussion instruments could be heard at special functions at the Newport Center School north and east of Iowa City. The musical rhythms were part of performances by the rural school's rhythm band made up of boys and girls in the lower grades at the school. Before one of those performances, the band's members would slip a green cape like the one pictured here over their shoulders. Each child was probably barely able to contain his or her excitement at the upcoming concert as the teacher helped to fasten the hook and eye on the cape's collar to keep it securely around the child's shoulders while they played and marched. The child would also don a marching band style hat with a plume on top also part of the band's uniform. Then, nervously picking up his or her drum, tambourine, symbol, triangle or other rhythm instrument, the player would take a place next to the rest of the band. Unfortunately, we don't know which Newport Center School student wore this particular cape or when they might have played in the band.

The establishment of rhythm bands in schools became popular in the 1930s and by 1940 several Johnson County rural schools boasted bands that performed at school and community events. Participating in the bands helped younger students learn to follow rhythms and how to play in a group as well as get experience performing which proponents thought important. Rhythm band sets were available from instrument companies if schools had the money to purchase instruments or schools had the option of having students construct the simple instruments they played. The simple band uniforms like this cape were probably made by the teacher or parent.

In the spring of 1940, the Newport Center band was directed by teacher Matilda Cole and based on reports in the Iowa City Press-Citizen the students played for at least two events that spring. Their performance during an end of the school year picnic in mid-May must have been bitter-sweet for the students as the event was also a farewell for their teacher who was getting married and so would be leaving the school after teaching there for two years. The second event was possibly much more exciting for the young children because they would be playing at a county wide event. On May 28, the rhythm band performed at the commencement exercises for the Johnson County rural school 8<sup>th</sup> grade graduates held at First United Methodist church in Iowa City.

Did you play in a rhythm band at a rural school? Did you play in the Newport Center band? If so, contribute to the preservation of local history by dropping a note with your memories to us at JCHS, PO Box 5081, Coralville, Iowa, 52241 or e-mail us at [leighann@johnsoncountyhistory.org](mailto:leighann@johnsoncountyhistory.org).